

Dry weather is holding back the stocking ratio in parts of the Shortgrass Country. Outfits that were able to run 15 deer hunters to the section last season are having trouble handling half the amount. As frost peels back the leaves, ranchers are becoming concerned whether their spreads will carry the contracted gamesmen until closing day.

Showing a lease this year has been like being in a quiz show. The redcaps are beginning to be far too nosy. Unpapered aliens stationed in the thickets to rattle horns won't close a deal as they would in other years. To do any business you have to work yourself down making horn rubs and charting game trails. The Penn Central Railroad Company would have really screamed if they'd had part of their fate bet on their ability to rent out some hunting grounds.

San Angelo hunters can't concentrate on hunting for worrying about whether the campsites are going to be close to water. As you may have heard, residents of the wool capitol are drinking the bock portion of their water supply and are swiftly on the way to becoming the largest dry camp on the continent.

It is tragic to think of Angeloans having to lick the frost from their windshields to satisfy their thirst, but no rancher can afford to have a flock of people gathered around a livestock watering. These old cows and ewes have to have a drink now and then, you know. Hunters looking for a water lease should try the gulf coast area.

Every morning the local coffee house has had a new round of deer hunting stories until recently the tales have had a lighthearted tone. However, earlier today, an old boy popped in the cafe wearing unmatched boots, so I guess the gunfire is beginning to get to them.

Nocturnal road hunting has been light out our way thus far, and the volleys are the less nerve wrecking sporadic blasts. Last season, we had several frightening displays of rapid fire attack. Packers must be going back to the manually operated weapons. On windy nights you can barely hear the shell fire.

Leases that have gone to elevated hunting stands are assuaging the terror of daytime hunting. After you get used to the rifles sweeping slowly in the turrets, your fear diminishes. Once you learn the timing of their sweep, you realize your body is in the cross hairs for only a split second. I think the slowness of the motion is what makes you feel that you are on target for a great length of time.

Gunners holding a fixed aim really alarm the cowboys. I talked to an oldtimer the other day who said he was getting so jittery under fire that he couldn't thread the wire through a float pan without steadying both elbows on the side of the water trough.

The thought that his shell shock had started from hearing the echo from too many rifle bolts slamming shut and too many ammunition slips clicking into position as he was feeding his boss's cows. He said that next year he was going on a combat pay scale or find a job on the railroad.

Some people never are happy unless they are complaining. I'll bet this fellow hadn't had a bullet hit within 20 steps of his pickup. The farthest he's ever been from a surgeon was 30 or 40 miles. Mertzon has one of the best volunteer ambulance corps in the country. He's just jealous because one of his brothers wised up and learned to be a beauty operator. He'd shut up if he could trade his saddle for a set of curling irons or a hair dryer. Drovers always have been an envious lot.

Shortgrassers are going to have to have the hunting money to get through the dry winter ahead. I thought when paid hunting started it was too good to last. Ranchers are going to have to learn some day that we aren't supposed to find anything lying on the ground, unless it's a dead calf or a dead lamb.